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No place to hide from the sky spies

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An officer in the Chadian army has said that the real reason for the sharp defeat of Libyan troops in northern Chad is that satellite photos supplied by both the United States and French governments give up to the minute dispositions of the Libyan forces.

So detailed is this information, the officer claims, that a truck cannot move through the remotest part of the Sahara without being monitored by an orbiting eye.

If a French estimate is correct that the fleeing Libyans left behind half a billion dollars' worth of Soviet-made weaponry, much of it sophisticated and never before obtainable by Western experts, it explains the high-level bombing by Libyan planes of the captured base at Ouadi Doum as an effort to destroy evidence before it can be hauled off.

The Russians, too, have spy satellites, although our side still thinks better of its own. This could turn out to be the first desert war in which no degree of secrecy will be left to military movements on either side.

Satellite photos and instant radio advice to commanders would have changed history. Cromwell couldn't have gotten away with concealing much of his army behind Dust Hill at Naseby. James II could know in time that William had forded the "unfordable" Boyne River.

Given an accurate photo of Gen. Meade's positions at Gettysburg, Robert E. Lee might have grasped the significance of Little Round Top. Constant photography of Japanese construction on the little island of Betio would have cured optimistic assessments by the U.S. Navy and Marines at Tarawa.

In the future, assuming the future holds something less than a push-button nuclear war, tactical surprises will be rare and success or failure will depend more on the proper evaluation of what is knowable.

But perhaps of even greater significance are the galloping techniques for spying behind guarded gates and closed doors.

Charges that Marine guards in our Moscow embassy permitted Russian agents to plow through the building in return for sexual favors

from Russian women point to a new and scarier day.

In classic espionage of the past, useful information was bought (Benedict Arnold), or seduced out of secret-holders (Mata Hari), or, best of all, filched by photographing and returning documents, leaving no hint that they had been compromised ("Cicero" in Ankara).

The Moscow embassy case is tougher than security problems of the past. We cannot know how many sophisticated listening devices were planted by the unauthorized visitors that could turn the building into a sieve. The good news is that Uncle Sam is scheduled to abandon the present embassy and move into a new one. The bad news is that the new one may be more secure than the old.

Russian constructors were permitted to build prefabricated modules without American supervision. It is feared that steel beams were actually cast over implanted devices.

Democratic Sen. Patrick J. Leahy of Vermont, former vice chairman of the Intelligence Committee, says, "The only honest approach is to tear it down and start all over again." Bye-bye about \$190 million. And Democratic Rep. Daniel Mica of Florida, head of the House committee that oversees embassy security, mourns, "What you have is a brand-new facility you cannot move into and a present embassy you cannot whisper in."

The quantum leaps of electronic science are making us wistful for the good old days when bugs were concealed in lamp sockets or hidden in bedsprings. Those are now as primitive and crude as the Gatling gun.

Prince Otto von Bismarck, 100 years ago, was ahead of his time when he cynically remarked, "There is only one military secret, and that is that there are no military secrets."

But, at least as far as overtrusting Western diplomacy is concerned, that time may have at last arrived.

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